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A Theoretical Examination of Institutional-Anomie Theory

Jón Gunnar Bernburg*

The last decade has seen a revived interest in using anomie theory in crime and deviance research. The present paper contributes to this development by offering an examination of a particular extension of anomie theory, namely, Messner and Rosenfeld's Institutional-Anomie theory. Explicating Institutional-Anomie theory relative to the sociologies of Durkheim, Merton and Polanyi, I find that this theory goes beyond Merton by using a strain of thought that is critical of liberal society. By bringing in the notion of the disembedded market economy, a central notion in the institutionalism of Polanyi and Durkheim, this theory links crime, anomie, and contemporary social change. I also discuss some of the limitations of linking crime with societal level processes in a Durkheimian rather than Mertonian manner.

The classical sociological notion of anomie has long been a conceptual tool to understand the relationship between social structure, culture and deviant behaviour. Central to different versions of anomie theory is the premise that humans are normative beings. People act and think on the basis of commonly shared definitions and traditions. To a greater and lesser extent the common meanings that emerge in social life have sentimental value for people; they constitute morality and ethics. Shared cultural values define and sanction people's goals and the means they use in reaching the goals. Anomie results when the power of social values to regulate the ends and the means of human conduct is weakened.

But anomie perspectives are not a unified body of theory. While Durkheim is usually seen as the founder of the sociological tradition of anomie theory, his notion of anomie changed fundamentally in the hands of American sociology (Orrù 1987; Besnard 1990). Durkheim's (1951) understanding of anomie derives from his concern about the disruptive tendencies of fundamental features of modern, industrial society. Durkheim argues that specific features of industrial society, particularly in the sphere of economic activity, produce a chronic state of normative deregulation. As a result, valued goals become ill conceived and the society fails to provide people with normative limits on their desires. In contrast, American anomie theorists have not emphasized anomie as the widespread lack of socially valued goals. Thus Merton's (1967/1994) influential essay, Social Structure and Anomie, does not cast in doubt the fundamental cultural ends of the society, that is, the normative ends of action. In Merton's theory social values are clearly defined in the mainstream egalitarian ideology and in the universal emphasis on monetary success. On the cultural level, Merton emphasizes the lack of equilibrium between socially described means and ends of action. Anomie is caused by the imbalance

* Bergthorugata 5, 101 Reykjavik, Iceland: JB7992@CSC.ALBANY.EDU. The writer thanks Steve Messner for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

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that results when cultural goals are overemphasized at the expense of institutionalized means. As Agnew (1997) puts it, ‘for Merton, normlessness refers to regulating goal achievement, whereas for Durkheim it refers to those norms regulating goals’ (p. 37).

Marco Orrù (1987: 118–19) explains this fundamental change in anomie theory in reference to the prevalent intellectual orientation on each continent. Thus the social historical conditions in America differed greatly from those in Europe. In contrast to European intellectuals, who were expected to be critical of social arrangements, American intellectuals were expected not to criticize the socially described ends of American society. In America, there has been a much more forceful ideology of social ends as given and therefore beyond dispute. Orrù further observes that Durkheim’s concept of anomie and the one found in contemporary American sociology differ exactly in this crucial way: for Durkheim anomie refers to the ill-conceived cultural goals of industrial societies, whereas for American sociologists anomie refers to the inadequacy of means for the fulfillment of society’s culturally sanctioned goals. These goals, by and large, have been implicitly adhered to in American sociology. This shift of focus implies an abandonment of the European sociological tradition of ‘Grand Theory’ which sketches the blueprint of a utopian society in favor of a piecemeal social engineering which looks for technical improvements in an otherwise sound social structure. (p. 119)

Orrù’s analysis on the nature of the American anomie tradition is of some significance in light of the recent interest in anomie theory in the study of crime and deviance. After a long recess the past decade has seen a revived interest in using anomie perspectives to explain crime and deviant behaviour. Several prominent theorists and researchers have again put the issue of normative regulation and deregulation to the fore of the study of deviance. Anomie perspectives have recently informed research in so disparate fields as delinquency (Agnew 1992), white-collar and corporate crime (Passas 1990), cross-national comparative studies of homicide (Chamblin and Cochran 1995; Messner and Rosenfeld 1997b), organizational deviance (Vaughan 1983, 1997) and suicide (Thorlindsson and Bjarnason 1998). Recent books with titles such as The Legacy of Anomie Theory (Adler and Laufer 1995) and The Future of Anomie Theory (Agnew and Passas 1997) also signify a revival of this theoretical tradition.

The recent revitalization of anomie theory brings the problem of the normlessness of ends and means of social action to the fore of theoretical considerations. A question that arises is whether in fact there are strains of thought within some of these recent efforts to refine and extend anomie theory that go beyond Orrù’s description of the American anomie tradition. In other words, have any of the recent developments in American anomie theory moved beyond the ‘consolation of liberal society’; have they shifted from focusing on Mertonian normlessness of means and to Durkheimian normlessness of ends? At stake here is how different conceptions of anomie draw our attention to different features of social organization.

While this question integrates the present paper, it is nevertheless beyond its scope to provide a conclusive answer to it. That would require a thorough investigation of all of the major revisions of anomie theory. Not withstanding this ideal aim, the present paper examines one particular extension of anomie theory as a likely candidate for an affirmation of the thesis stated above, namely, Institutional-Anomie theory (Messner and Rosenfeld 1994, 1997a). A few points guide this decision. First, while some of the most significant recent revisions of anomie theory aim to explain between-individual variation in deviance (Agnew 1992, 1997: Menard 1995, 1997), Institutional-Anomie theory is a
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macro level theory that aims to account for societal level processes. Furthermore, as I argue below, this theory specifies how the emergence of anomie is related to specific institutional arrangements of contemporary society (Messner and Rosenfeld 1994: 44–57). By so doing the theory creates a conceptual framework that renders contemporary changes in industrial societies—declining political restraints on market economy, globalization, decline of the welfare state, neoliberal social policy, and so on—relevant to the study of crime and deviance. Finally, Institutional-Anomie theory has recently inspired empirical research that lends support to its central claims (Chamblin and Cochran 1995; Messner and Rosenfeld 1997; Savolainen 2000), making it relevant for theoretical scrutiny.

To shed light on the thesis stated above, I ask the following questions. How does Institutional-Anomie theory differ from prior anomie theories of crime and deviance? Does this theoretical effort signal a concern for the ‘soundness’ of modern social structure, in contrast to Orrú’s description of the intellectual orientation of American sociologists? More generally, is this line of theorizing a response to profound social changes or conditions that bring us back to Durkheim’s notion of ‘pathologic’ trends in modern society? What are some of the problems and prospects associated with this intellectual orientation?

The paper proceeds as follows. First, I discuss how Institutional-Anomie theory departs from Merton’s Social Structure and Anomie. The point of this discussion is to see how it differs from traditional American anomie theories. I point out that Institutional-Anomie theory goes beyond this tradition by offering a theory of the societal sources of the anomie ethic. I then discuss how Institutional-Anomie theory relates to some profound critiques of modern social organization—in particular to Durkheim’s discussion of anomie suicide, but also to Polanyi’s notion of the disembedded market economy. I find that there is a shared understanding among these authors that anomie cultural characteristics emerge because the market economy is left unchecked by non-economic institutions. In the fourth section, I discuss how the shift to the institutional level reflects social change. I suggest that bringing back in the notion of the disembedded economy, highlighted by Durkheim and Polanyi, reflect societal changes currently taking place. Finally, however, I take a more critical look at some of the implications of Institutional-Anomie theory vis-à-vis Merton by identifying some limitations of linking crime with societal level processes in a Durkheimian rather than Mertonian manner.

Institutional-Anomie Theory

Messner and Rosenfeld’s (1994, 1997a) Institutional-Anomie theory of crime attempts to comprehensively account for the interplay between the ‘fundamental’ features of social organization, namely, culture and social structure. On the one hand, these authors stay faithful to Merton in that they see specific cultural values giving rise to anomie pressures. These are the value-orientations of the ‘American Dream’, namely, ‘a broad cultural ethos that entails a commitment to the goal of material success, to be pursued by everyone in society, under conditions of open, individual competition’ (1994: 6). In line with Merton, this cultural ethos ‘encourages an exaggerated emphasis on monetary achievement while devaluing alternative criterion of success, it promotes a preoccupation with the realization of goals while de-emphasizing the importance of the ways in
which these goals are pursued’ (p. 10). Thus the American Dream creates pressure to achieve, but minimizes the pressure to play by the rules. Under these circumstances people become more likely to use the ‘most technically efficient means necessary’ in reaching their goals. The result is a higher rate of predatory crime.1

However, Messner and Rosenfeld depart from Merton in that they see the structural sources of this anomic cultural ethos in the nature of the capitalist market economy, more specifically, in the relationship between the economy and non-economic institutions. They argue that when the market economy is an unusually powerful social institution relative to vital non-economic institutions, as seems to be the case in the United States, it disrupts the normal functioning of the other institutions. Specifically, the value-orientations of the market economy, that is, the pursuit of self-interest, attraction to monetary rewards, and competition, become exaggerated relative to the value-orientations of institutions such as the family, the education, and the polity. This manifests in (1) the devaluation of non-economic institutional functions and roles (2) the accommodation of institutions by economic requirements, and (3) the penetration of economic norms into other institutional domains. That the dominance of the economy in the institutional balance of power weakens the ability of the other social institutions to exercise social control has important implications for the rate of deviant behaviour. These institutions serve to ‘mobilize and deploy resources for the achievement of collective goals’ and ‘socialize members to accept the society’s fundamental normative patterns’ (p. 65). The invasion of the market economy into the other institutions obstructs the functioning of these vital institutions. When this happens, the society fails to regulate the conduct of its members effectively by means of societal norms and roles.

Institutional-Anomie theory stipulates a reciprocal causal relationship between the culture and the institutional structure. Most importantly, it holds that the dominance of the market economy supports and even breeds a cultural ethos characterized by the American Dream. Note, however, that in Messner and Rosenfeld’s recent statements the anomic cultural ethos is not, it seems, specifically American. Rather, it is the result of the dominance of the capitalist market economy in other capitalist countries as well (Messner and Rosenfeld 1997a: 213; this theme is also emphasized by Hagan et al. 1998).

To be sure, Messner and Rosenfeld explicitly stay faithful to Merton’s influential means-ends schema. Institutional-Anomie theory does not hold that anomie result from deregulated ends, but from the deregulated means of social action. The basic social values in question—the ends of the market ethos—are not problematic per se, but they become so only because of the normlessness of means.

There is nothing inherently criminogenic about the market values of competition and materialism . . . Market values of competition and materialism lead to crime, we suggest, only when they occur in combination with what can be termed an ‘anomic ethic.’ Following Merton, the anomic ethic refers to the excessive emphasis on the goals of social action regardless of the moral status of the means used to achieve social goals. (Messner and Rosenfeld 1997a: 214)

1 There is some debate in the literature about the scope of applicability of Institutional-Anomie theory. Messner and Rosenfeld mention that it applies to serious predatory crime, both violent and property crime. Chamblin and Cochran (1995), in contrast, have argued that Institutional-Anomie theory applies most directly to property crime.
Nevertheless, Institutional-Anomie theory does give us a theory of the emergence of the ‘anomic ethic’—contra Merton—and thus goes beyond the means-ends schema in an important way. Thus, whereas Merton sees the anomic ethic as a cultural deficit in American society (which rhymes nicely with Orrù’s description of American anomie theory as occupied with ‘technical improvements in an otherwise sound social structure’), Institutional-Anomie theory specifies institutional arrangements give rise to the emergence of the anomic ethic. Moreover, the anomic ethic emerges from institutional conditions that are a defining feature of modern society. ‘Economic dominance stimulates the emergence of anomie at the cultural level’ (p. 213). The valued ends of social action are thus not ‘given’ in Institutional-Anomie theory, rather the theory attempts to explain their relative emphasis in the culture. Economic dominance creates an ‘exaggerated’ emphasis on particular ends, but, being disembedded from other social institutions, it fails to provide normative limits on these ends.

In conclusion, Institutional-Anomie theory follows Merton’s notion of the anomic ethic (the American Dream), but focuses on very different structural sources for anomie. On the structural level, an important part of Merton’s notion of anomie is the uneven distribution of opportunities throughout the social structure. The social structure is problematic insofar as it fails to live up to its promise of equal opportunity. Institutional-Anomie theory goes up a level of analysis by focusing on the institutional sources of the anomic ethic itself. The theory attempts to explain the institutional arrangements that sustain and reinforce this ethic. As I discuss in the following section, the theory does so by using a strain of thought that is highly critical of liberal society.

Anomie and the Notion of the Disembedded Economy

Institutional-Anomie theory incorporates a strain of social thought that sees the market economy, if left unregulated by other social institutions, as inherently obtrusive to human organization. For our purposes, this strain of thought is most clearly expressed in the work of Karl Polanyi (1944/1957, 1947/1968, 1957/1968) and Emile Durkheim (1897/1951), both of which are concerned with the social consequences of the unchecked market.²

In The Great Transformation, Polanyi (1957) argues that modern society is fundamentally different from pre-existing societies in that the economic system is not embedded or regulated by other social institutions. In pre-modern societies, through the principles of reciprocity or redistribution, the economic system was a function of social organization: ‘Custom and law, magic and religion co-operated in inducing the individual to comply with rules of behaviour which, eventually, ensured his functioning in the economic system’ (p. 55). Since, however, the market pattern is related to a specific motive of its own, namely, ‘the motive to truck and barter’, this pattern can create an institution of its own. Hence, when the market economy is unregulated by non-economic institutions, the principles of the market become the dominating principle of society, subjugating social relations to market principles (in particular, treating people as commodities). This happens because ‘once the economic system is organized in separate institutions, based

² In subsequent work, Messner and Rosenfeld (1997c) have made explicit linkage between Institutional-Anomie theory and Polanyi’s writing on self-regulating markets.
on specific motives and conferring a special status, society must be shaped in such a manner as to allow that system to function according to its own laws' (p. 57). In short, Polanyi argues that as the market economy becomes decoupled from other social institutions, it tends to dominate them. If left unchecked the market economy penetrates and disrupts the functioning of other institutions. Much as Institutional-Anomie theory stipulates, when the market becomes self-regulating social relationships are embedded in the economic system ‘instead of the economic system being embedded in social relationships’ (Polanyi 1968: 70).

Polanyi recognizes that the disembedded economy has profound influence on society’s culture. At times, even, Polanyi’s argument implies that the very cultural characteristics discussed by Merton and later Messner and Rosenfeld emerge from the disembeddedness of the market economy. Drawing on anthropological evidence, Polanyi is convinced that modern economic motives, realized in profit-seeking individuals, are the creation of the decoupling of the market economy from other social institutions. On the one hand, then, a disembedded market economy colonizes all other aspects of social life and thus places great emphasis on economic motives in the culture:

Since no human aggregation can survive without a functioning productive apparatus, its embodiment in a distinct and separate sphere had the effect of making the ‘rest’ of society dependent upon that sphere . . . As a result, the market mechanism became determinative for the life of the body social . . . 
‘Economic motives’ reigned supreme in a world of their own, and the individual was made to act on them under pain of being trodden under foot by the juggernaut market. Such a forced conversion to a utilitarian outlook fatefuly warped Western man’s understanding of himself. (Polanyi 1968; italics added)

On the other hand, the disembedded market economy leaves economic motives unchecked by other social institutions:

The market pattern . . . being related to a peculiar motive of its own, the motive of truck or barter, is capable of creating a specific institution, namely, the market. Ultimately, that is why the control of the economic system by the market is of overwhelming consequence to the whole organization of society: it means no less than the running of the society as an adjunct to the market. Instead of economy being embedded in social relations, social relations are embedded in the economic system. (Polanyi 1957: 57; italics added)

Although Polanyi is not interested in the degree to which the disembeddedness of the economy affects the rate of deviant behaviour, he nevertheless suggests that both the goals of monetary success and the absence of institutionalized means to reach these goals emerge when the economy becomes disembedded from other social institutions. Such motives, moreover, are not a natural condition as envisioned by Adam Smith. A disembedded economy organizes social relationships in its fashion and therefore the ‘value-orientations’ of the market gain dominance, to use Messner and Rosenfeld’s

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3 Nevertheless, Polanyi vaguely hints at the potential consequences for crime and deviant behaviour. Thus, in The Great Transformation (1957: 73) he writes: ‘To allow the market mechanism to be sole director of the fate of human beings and their natural environment, indeed, even of the amount and use of purchasing power, would result in the demolition of society . . . Robbed of the protective covering of cultural institutions, human beings would perish from the effects of social exposure; they would die as the victims of acute social dislocation through vice, perversion, crime, and starvation.’
terminology. A disembedded economy is by definition weakly governed by social norms and therefore there are weak norms governing the means of reaching the goals thus emphasized.

The same trend of thought is found in Durkheim’s classic statements on anomic suicide. In the context of our discussion, Durkheim’s work is even more revealing than Polanyi’s is because in fact he was very much interested in explaining anomie and patterns of deviant behaviour. In *Suicide*, Durkheim argues that the modern economy is in a state of chronic deregulation. No longer regulated by religion or government, the economy is in fact detached from other social ‘organs’ [institutions]. Durkheim claims that the modern economy has the ‘power to subordinate other social organs to itself and to make them converge toward one dominant aim’ (1951: 255). Moreover, industry, instead of being still regarded as a means to an end transcending itself, has become the supreme end of individuals and societies alike. Thereupon the appetites thus excited have become freed of any limiting authority . . . Ultimately, this liberation of desires has been made worse by the very development of industry and the almost infinite extension of the market. (p. 255)

The resemblance of Durkheim’s discussion to Polanyi and to Institutional-Anomie theory is striking. All these authors rely on the notion of the disembedded market economy in one form or another. Moreover, Durkheim explicitly (if not very systematically) recognizes that the disembedded economy—which for him is a defining feature of modernity—is a major source of social deregulation, or anomie.

Durkheim does not define anomie as just one thing. On the one hand, he argues that anomie is the normlessness of goals. In the absence of a social authority ‘our capacity for feeling is in itself an insatiable and bottomless abyss’ (1951: 247). To the extent that society exerts authority over individuals, it creates boundaries for their desires, and only then can they be content. Thence, when regulation fails ‘we see society gripped by a dejection and pessimism reflected in the curve of suicides’ (1925/1961: 68). On the other hand, particularly where Durkheim is concerned with the disembedded economy in *Suicide*, anomie arises when the socially prescribed goals are practically unattainable, by definition. ‘To pursue a goal which is by definition unattainable is to condemn oneself to a state of perpetual unhappiness’ (1951: 248). In this case, the ends are not really undefined, but nevertheless by definition limitless. The disembedded economy is an important source of this kind of anomie:

Such is the source of excitement predominating in this part of society, and which has thence extended to other parts. There, the state of crisis and anom[ie] is constant and, so to speak, normal. From top to bottom of the ladder, greed is aroused without knowing where to find ultimate foothold. Nothing can calm it, since its goal is for beyond all it can attain . . . A thirst arises for novelties, unfamiliar pleasures, nameless sensations, all of which lose their savor once known. (p. 256)

There is a striking resemblance between Institutional-Anomie theory and Durkheim’s theory in the very nature of the anomic ethic that has its roots in the disembedded economy. Durkheim indeed recognizes that the disembedded economy produces infinite goals, but also that these goals are morally sanctioned. For Durkheim, the anomic ethic indeed contains normatively sanctioned ends (as opposed to normless ends), but these ends are by definition limitless.
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...these dispositions are so inbred that society has grown to accept them and is accustomed to think them normal. It is everlastingly repeated that it is in man's nature to be eternally dissatisfied, constantly to advance, without relief or rest, toward an indefinite goal. The longing for infinity is daily represented as a mark of moral distinction, whereas it can only appear with unregulated consciences which elevate to a rule the lack of rule from which they suffer. The doctrine of the most ruthless and swift progress has become an article of faith... praising the advantages of instability. (p. 257; italics added)

In essence, then, Durkheim identifies the same cultural characteristics as Merton and later Messner and Rosenfeld identify in the 'American Dream'. In this context, Horton observes that 'a pathological urge for constant advancement and the promotion of a passion for the indefinite as a mark of moral distinction were discussed by Durkheim [and Merton alike,]... but Durkheim questioned the very values which Merton holds constant' (Horton 1964, cited in Passas 1995: 96). Just as Messner and Rosenfeld recognize, then, for Durkheim the anomic ethic exaggerates monetary success, but nevertheless compels people to adhere to this end. In this sense, the ends are not normless, but normatively sanctioned. In Messner's and Rosenfeld's account, this cultural ethos is characterized by four 'value-orientations' (1994, pp. 62-5): (1) An overriding pressure on the individuals to achieve at any cost; (2) intense individualism, where one's fellow member becomes one's competitor; (3) universalism; the standards of success apply equally to all members of society; and (4) monetary 'fetishism', where money is the metric of success, a social fact that gives rise to a 'never-ending' achievement—in principle, it is always possible to have more. As Durkheim (1951) would have it, the anomic ethic describes goals that are limitless and which are no longer bounded by clear distribution of statuses (they are universal).

In short, Institutional-Anomie theory makes use of Merton's elaboration of anomie, but brings us back to the type of social criticism that Durkheim and Polanyi emphasize. Whereas Merton emphasizes imbalance between components of a given social fabric (capitalist market society), Durkheim and Polanyi focus on the nature of the social fabric itself—in comparison with a different kind of social organization. Messner and Rosenfeld's institutional framework clearly brings us back to the latter's level of thinking. And, if implicitly, by so doing their notion of anomie becomes very similar to that of Durkheim and Polanyi.

Anomie Theory in Society

Recently, Nicos Passas has pointed out that the differences between the anomie theories of Durkheim and Merton reflect the different social environments of these authors (1995: 93–4). Thus Durkheim observes the rootlessness of rapid industrial growth in French society at the turn of the century and sees these forces as the major source of anomie. He argues that rapid industrial growth, combined with a less speedy growth of moral forces to regulate it, produces relentless status-seeking and limitless aspirations—anomie. Merton, in contrast, observes these forces after they are institutionalized. Therefore, he sees them as normal—given, if you will—and focuses on how the culture can be viewed as a more stable source of anomie.
Passas's observation adds an important historical dimension to my discussion. As Polanyi (1957) so vigorously argues, the nineteenth century witnessed the development of the self-regulated market. Social relations became 'embedded in the economic system' (p. 57), and political economists praised the motive of individual profit seeking as humanity’s natural condition. In point of fact, this is the social reality that Durkheim faces. And, as I have argued above, it is precisely this social condition that Durkheim sees as a major social source of anomie. Merton, in contrast, theorizes anomie in the aftermath of the Great Depression. This is a period when the market’s self-destructive tendency was held in check by the nation state (Polanyi 1957). Therefore Merton focuses on factors that were more internal to the social system, namely, imbalance between the given ends and means of social action, on the one hand, and the opportunity structure, on the other.

Above I argued that Institutional-Anomie theory brings us back to the concerns of Durkheim and Polanyi about the disembedded economy. I suggest that this move indeed reflect important societal changes currently taking place. The conditions faced by sociologists today are increasingly similar to those that Polanyi describes in nineteenth century England, and those that Durkheim faced in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century—namely, the trend toward the dominance of the market logic in social institutions. These current social changes manifest in the increasingly unregulated flow of capital, which results in the decreasing power of nation states over capital and labour (Teeple 1995) and decline of public welfare spending (Olsen 1996). ‘Faced with the power of globalized production and international finance, including dept structures, leaders are constrained to concentrate on enhancing national conditions for competing forms of capitalism’ (Mittelman 1996: 7). In turn, the decreasing power of the state combined with the increasing power of neoliberal rhetoric (Block 1990; Wolfe 1989) results in ‘re-commodification’ of labour, where people are increasingly left unguarded against market forces (Messner and Rosenfeld 1997b). On the organizational level, furthermore, this change has been described in many organizational fields as an institutional shift to a market logic (Thornton and Ocasio 1999). This is manifested, for example, in the overriding emphasis on the goal of profit making and delegitimization of alternative goals and decreased commitment to professional values other than those of professionals educated in business and management (Useem 1996; Oakes et al. 1998; Thornton and Ocasio 1999). Institutional-Anomie theory calls our attention to these societal processes, claiming that there are consequences for the rate of crime and deviant behaviour—like Durkheim did in the beginning of the twentieth century.

Thus far my focus has been on how Institutional-Anomie theory goes ‘beyond’ Merton. I have discussed how this theory identifies linkages that are absent in Merton’s formulation, namely, how it identifies the institutional source of anomie culture, and how it thus offers a link between crime and social change. This important contribution can inform empirical research of crime rates as reflection of changes in the institutional environments across societies and time periods. In particular, this approach is relevant for studying the impact of the current societal drifting toward the market logic. In the following section, however, I develop a more critical view of Institutional-Anomie theory vis-à-vis Merton’s anomie theory. An important implication of Institutional-Anomie theory—as it aims to link crime with societal level processes in a Durkheimian, rather than Mertonian, manner—is that it shifts the focus away from Merton’s emphasis on social stratification (Gesualdi 1996–7).
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Gains and Losses: Another Look at Institutional-Anomie Theory vis-à-vis Merton

Merton focuses on the discrepancy between the ethic of universal goals and unequal opportunity structure. In this view, social structure is a stable pattern of human relations; it refers to the distribution of social-economic statuses. In contrast, Messner and Rosenfeld focus on social structure as the balance of power between the major institutions of society. Following a Parsonian approach, these authors do not conceptualize social structure as a stable pattern of relations between people, but rather functional relations between stable patterns of norms. That the two theories focus on social structure in such a different manner is of major importance. How social structure is understood has important implications for the explanatory scope of each theory. Thus Institutional-Anomie theory specifies the institutional arrangements that contribute to the emergence of anomic culture. Merton’s theory specifies the objective conditions that indeed translate anomic norms and goals—culture—into patterns of deviant and conforming behaviour.

In Institutional-Anomie theory, anomic pressures arise when a nexus of reinforcing cultural patterns develops, producing an overemphasis on the market ethic and undermining the regulatory power of social norms (because of the weakening the regulatory function of the family, the education system, and the political system). As a result, individuals feel an overriding pressure to achieve and at the same time are confronted with weak normative restraints on legitimate means to achieve. This theorizing elaborates and expands Merton’s explanation of anomie on the cultural level. Merton does not specify the structural features that bring about cultural anomie (Taylor et al. 1973: 103). Institutional-Anomie’s structural-functional approach offers an explanation of both the societal sources of the overriding goals of achievement and the weakening of norms guiding the means.4

However, while Institutional-Anomie theory clarifies the processes that Merton identifies on the cultural level, it makes no use of his key innovative discussion of the discrepancy between culture and social structure. Messner and Rosenfeld ignore Merton’s insight on the role of the unequal distribution of people’s objective conditions in translating the anomic ethic into crime and deviant behaviour. Thus Institutional-Anomie theory claims that on the individual level the anomic ethic (culture) is a sufficient condition for anomic pressure. The cultural impact of the anomic ethic is not specified by a position in the distribution of social statuses. As we have seen above, this notion of anomie is very much in accordance with Durkheim’s notion of anomic suicide. The crux of this approach, from Durkheim on, is that the anomic ethic compels individuals to aspire beyond their capabilities, regardless of what the latter may be. By definition, the social goal of monetary success is never accomplished.

But thus limiting the theory to the cultural level—the proximate cause of crime encompassed by the theory is the cultural emphasis on limitless goals in combination with weak norms—renders vague the relationship between the anomic ethic and crime. In the absence of the notion of opportunity distribution it becomes unclear why

4 Moreover, the theory makes important contribution in clarifying how institutional arrangement affect social structural control on the individual level (Hirschi 1969; Sampson and Groves 1989; Sampson and Laub 1993).
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predatory crime is ever perceived as a more efficient means to achievement than legitimate forms of behaviour. If the moral of the anomic ethic is ‘by any means necessary’, which means actually are necessary, advantageous, or even possible, depends on the distribution of people’s objective conditions and opportunities. The genius of Merton’s approach is indeed the recognition that objective conditions in which goals and norms operate are crucial in specifying their effect on action. Thus, the distinctive prediction to be derived from Merton’s theory is that structural and cultural variables affect rates of deviance in an ‘interactive’ manner. The theory stipulates that certain structural conditions, in combination with certain cultural conditions, generate anomie and high rates of deviant behaviour. (Messner 1988: 47; italics in original)

Let me use a simple example. A wealthy stockbroker is unlikely to commit an armed robbery as a means of reaching unsatisfied aspirations beyond his or her legitimate means, but to a member of the disadvantaged classes (Wilson 1987) this may sometimes seem as a viable option. Of course, as some anomie theorists have emphasized (Passas 1997), the stockbroker may consider using his position in other, though no less destructive, ways. The latter does not render social stratification irrelevant, but precisely the opposite. Social stratification specifies how anomic culture is translated into action, and what type of action. This example should also remind us of Cloward’s (1959/1994) argument that both legitimate and illegitimate opportunity structures are crucial in specifying the effect of culture on action. This line of reasoning thus also offers opportunities to use the core ideas of Institutional-Anomie theory and Merton’s anomie theory to inform research on white-collar crime and organizational deviance.

In this context, we should note that Merton’s anomie theory has produced supportive empirical findings (Blau and Blau 1982; Krahn et al. 1986; Messner 1988), that is, when understood as a macro level theory of crime rates (Messner 1988).

Recognizing the limitations of Institutional-Anomie theory vis-à-vis Merton—and the limitations of Merton vis-à-vis Institutional-Anomie theory—we reach the following conclusion. Institutional-Anomie theory explains how the anomic culture emerges and how it is sustained and amplified. The strategy of this approach is linking the emergence of this cultural pattern with institutional arrangements, and therefore offering an important link to social change. In this sense the theory highlights the strength of Durkheimian sociology. However, as a theory of criminal action, Institutional-Anomie theory risks slipping into an ‘oversocialized view’ (Granovetter 1985) of how norms and goals affect behaviour. In contrast, Merton’s theory is guided by a notion of people making choices in the context of their socially structured realities (Nee and Brinton 1998). Merton specifies the objective conditions that translate norms and goals—culture—into crime. Merton’s approach is thus more suitable in specifying how anomic culture—given in Merton but explained in Institutional-Anomie theory—creates pressure to innovate because of incompatibility of culture with people’s objective conditions.

In this sense, therefore, these theoretical arguments—Merton’s and Messner and Rosenfeld’s—may be seen as supplementing each other. In fact, recent empirical work suggests that together these theories provide a richer macro level explanation of crime and deviance than each does on its own. Although studies have not been guided by an explicit integration of the theories provided by Merton on the one hand and Messner and Rosenfeld on the other, the evidence suggests that such integration may be a fruitful
endeavour. Two recent studies indicate that social stratification specifies the effect of market dominance in the institutional balance of power on crime rates (Chamblin and Cochran 1995; Savolainen 2000). A strong anomic ethic—which, in turn, has structural underpinnings in the weakening of non-economic institutions relative to the market economy—only creates real life situations conducive to predatory street crime when a substantial part of the population experiences such crime as a means to the end of monetary achievement.

Conclusion

Social analysts have focused on different social structural conditions in their attempt to link crime and social structure through the medium of anomie theory. I have discussed how different formulations turn our attention to different features of social structure and social change. Institutional-Anomie theory clearly transcends Orrù’s description of the American anomie tradition, offering an attempt to bring back the institutional tradition in explaining deviant behaviour. The theory brings us back to the enterprise of European sociologists of the nineteenth century, Durkheim in particular, for which a sociology of deviance was also a study of contemporary societal changes. Most importantly the theory opens up the possibility of studying crime and deviance in direct relation to important social concerns of our time, such as the penetration of the market logic and market arrangements into other social spheres (Block 1990; Wolfe 1989) and the decline of the welfare state (Messner and Rosenfeld 1997). The revitalization of the institutional level of analysis is also a fresh contribution to contemporary research on crime and deviance, which often offers tenuous linkages between crime and social organization (Walton 1998; Young 1998). As Messner (1988) has pointed out, informing research with a theory of social organization has been the ‘the road not taken’ in crime and deviance research. The anomie tradition continues to be a medium to understand the impact of contemporary social change on crime. I have argued that contemporary patterning of social organization highlights the strength of Durkheimian sociology and the anomie theory tradition more generally. The future of this work, however, is likely to depend on appreciation for the limitations associated with this intellectual heritage.

References

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